

Increasing Student Autonomy and Investment in Discussions: Journaling to Reflect on Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

Journaling can assist teachers in reflecting on their teaching practices by providing a low-pressure way to consider the relationships between classroom incidents, teaching practices, and theory. While journaling about my experience of teaching English discussion skills to an uninspired class of Japanese university freshmen, I *reflected-on-action* that occurred in the classroom and *reflected-for-action* that I could take to better my teaching practices in future lessons (Murphy, 2014). Through this process, I was able to meaningfully engage with theory and discover ways to alter my teaching practices to increase opportunities for meaningful learning and to enhance students' cognitive and affective investment in discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Rikkyo University in Tokyo requires all freshmen to take a two-semester discussion course managed by the university's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC). Each semester consists of fourteen once-per-week lessons, with class sizes ranging from seven to nine students. Lessons are nearly uniformly structured and are focused on increasing students' fluent and appropriate use of a small number of functional language skills intended to aid the expression of ideas in a discussion (such as giving opinions, reasons, and examples) and to aid in the repair of communication (such as asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and checking understanding) (Hurling, 2012).

In my second semester as an EDC instructor, I kept a teaching journal in order to reflect on my teaching practices. In deciding on a journaling style, I chose to use the same automatic stream-of-consciousness approach that I usually use in my personal and professional journaling, in which I freely and rapidly recount the events of the class, usually chronologically, but with greatest detail and attention given to incidents most salient to me, whether emotionally or pedagogically. Farrell (2007) notes the benefit of this style:

[G]rammar, style and organization are less important than obtaining a written record of teaching acts and a teacher's feelings and thoughts about those teaching acts. This type of exploratory writing can generate lots of ideas and awareness that can be examined later and analysed for recurring patterns of events (p. 112).

This approach also helped me discover and address root causes, ancillary issues, and connections between salient classroom incidents. After each lesson, I used my journal to *reflect-on-action* that occurred in the classroom and to *reflect-for-action* that I could take to better my teaching practices in future lessons (Murphy, 2014). After recording my journal entries using an "automatic" stream-of-consciousness style, I later reviewed to my entries to discern why certain classroom incidents were more salient to me than others and attempt to address my own biases and attentive deficiencies.

During the first five lessons of the semester, I observed the social dynamics and motivations of my classes and identified their strengths and weaknesses with regards to the cognitive, affective, and practical objectives of the course (Hurling, 2012). I focused my journaling on a class composed of eight students: six females and two males, in a class with TOEIC scores ranging from 480 to 679. My perception was that their motivation levels were mixed, ranging from highly

motivated (only two students who consistently initiated discussions without prompting) to highly unmotivated (one student who said she did not enjoy learning English). The pattern that emerged in my early journal entries was that this class typically fulfilled course goals of functional language use, but their discussions were generally uninteresting, unoriginal, and devoid of content from outside of the textbook.

I became concerned that this particular class was not achieving meaningful learning, that students were using functional language in a rote way rather than integrating their “existing knowledge/experience and new material” (Brown, 2007b, p. 66). As a result, my journal became a valuable tool for considering how to apply theory to improve my teaching practices in ways that encouraged my students to have more interesting and original discussions while acquiring target functional language skills.

DISCUSSION

Increasing Autonomy through Student-Led Feedback

Prior to the sixth lesson with this group, I began reflecting on why this class failed to generate original ideas, and I first examined my own role in the classroom. In this course, I act as a facilitator. Students do the vast majority of the speaking; my role is to present target language and set goals based on the target language and lesson aims. I reflected that I had been using almost exclusively teacher-led feedback to set goals for target language use. However, L2 mastery requires learners to exert control of their own learning; in a university language classroom, students benefit from setting their own goals and collaborating with their classmates to achieve these goals (Bain, 2004; Brown, 2007b; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). I therefore posited that when I set my students’ goals without my students’ involvement, I was decreasing their cognitive investment in their own learning.

As a result, in the sixth lesson, I attempted to give students more ownership of their goals by using predominantly student-led feedback. The cognitive principle of autonomous learning informed my decision to have students lead their own feedback, as students must develop an awareness of “their own strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and styles” (Brown, 2017a, p. 260-261). Since the course evaluation is largely based on cognitive and practical objectives of effective communication (Hurling, 2012), I asked the groups to evaluate their functional language usage after their discussion. This promoted the students’ awareness of their collective strengths and weaknesses; students determined which functional language they used frequently as well as ways they could have used other phrases more frequently. Their self-evaluation proved relatively successful, as half of the students improved the frequency and appropriateness of their functional language usage in their next discussion.

However, Hurling (2012) also notes affective objectives of the course, including that students should both “enjoy... and value discussing topics in depth using English.” (p. 1-4). To this end, I also asked students to share their favorite ideas from their discussion. However, students struggled to choose a favorite idea. In my journal I wrote that one student “had a difficult time recalling any favorite ideas from their discussion before finally settling on one of her own ideas.” I believed that this was a result of shallow exploration into the lesson topic’s content, and their performance constituted a failure to meet the course’s affective objectives.

Managing Group Dynamics and Increasing Meaningful Learning

After the sixth lesson, my reflections shifted to the issue of group dynamics. I noted in my journal that many students in this class had been hesitant to speak when discussing the benefits and risks of social media, and that three students “acted on feedback, but never went above and beyond.”

In the seventh lesson, I thus focused on grouping students in ways that might improve

dynamics for promoting the sharing and discussion of original ideas (for which the students had greater affective investment) rather than relying on ideas provided by the textbook (in which the students may have more limited investment). For longer group discussions, I grouped the most outgoing students with the least outgoing students in the hope that they would provide models and content that their less outgoing peers could imitate and react to. The group's strongest ideas came from their personal experiences; in a discussion about the influence of the media, they described celebrity photographs and gave examples of foreign movies that taught them about foreign culture. Afterward, I reflected with some surprise that this normally unoriginal class "actually had more interesting discussions than usual."

I speculated in my reflections that students' successful generation of original content in this lesson may have had less to do with their groupings and more to do with the topics and target functional language for the lesson. This lesson's topics included discussions about the influence of famous people and the effects of media, and the functional language skill was asking about and discussing the sources of information that they already knew. Thus, compared to other topics, students had a strong base of knowledge and experiences that they could use in their discussions. Following Brown's (2007b) principle of meaningful learning, I posited that students' tendency to rote use functional phrases without adding personal ideas was disrupted in this lesson because they were more knowledgeable and interested in the topic than some previous topics for which they possessed less experience and/or interest (for example, students did not have a great variety of ideas when discussing the value of using English in various professional contexts). In other words, students had more affective investment in their discussions because they had more experiences and stronger opinions about the topic.

Using Evaluation as an Extrinsic Motivator and the Anticipation of Reward

Lesson eight and the first half of lesson nine were dedicated to preparing students for a formal evaluation of their discussion skills in the latter half of lesson nine. Because the course design is such that the use of discussion skills is used to evaluate student performance in discussions, I shifted my reflections away from content and back toward functional language usage in these two classes. In my journal, I wrote, "Students were focused without any pushing on my part... [they] course-corrected and used the functional phrases frequently during practice phases before the evaluation."

It was clear that students were more motivated than usual to perform the functional language skills largely because of the impending evaluation. Their short-term motivation can likely be attributed to Brown's (2007b) principle of "anticipation of reward." In other words, students were extrinsically motivated by the reward of receiving a high grade as a result of their efforts (p. 66-67). Although grades motivated short-term gains, I am skeptical of the long-term gains of this sort of motivational strategy because such extrinsic motivators may not exist to encourage L2 acquisition outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, an extrinsic motivator can facilitate intrinsic motivators; in this case, of providing students with opportunities to share ideas and collaborate to achieve goals (Brown, 2007a, p. 180-182). However, this class did not demonstrate much intrinsic motivation in either of these regards; they appeared to be almost solely extrinsically motivated by the impending evaluation.

Another aspect of this principle of reward was the mid-lesson actionable feedback that I provided students in each lesson. This feedback, a mix of giving praise and setting goals related to students' functional language use, consistently led to greater short-term use of functional language skills by students in the second half of class. However, I noticed that despite their improvement, this class seemed largely uninterested in feedback related to functional language usage, even when I used their utterances as examples in my feedback.

Encouraging More Meaningful Learning

As a result, in lesson ten, I focused much more heavily on encouraging idea development throughout the lesson, in both my presentation of activities and my feedback afterward. In my journal, I wrote:

After students completed the preparation activity for their first discussion [about work-life balance], I introduced a few of my original ideas for them to modify [such as a shorter work week and a bonus for getting enough sleep]. This didn't result in any uptake of these ideas [in the discussion itself]. Instead, students stuck to the book's ideas [such as allowing flexible working hours and limiting overtime] despite my suggestions. I'm not sure why. Perhaps if I had introduced them as further options to the book's ideas [during the preparation activity], it would've worked better. During the first discussion, idea development wasn't any better than it has been in the past.

However, I emphasized ideas in my feedback more strongly than usual. I highlighted specific examples of ideas from students with minimal reference to functional language usage, and they were more attentive than usual, noting that I cared about their content development.

Before they began preparing for their next discussion, I again emphasized that they should think of original ideas, and they were actually surprisingly keen to develop original ideas [such as how increasing immigration might be inconvenient from a Japanese customer's perspective because of language differences]. They even encouraged each other to share more original ideas several times throughout the discussion. I ended the lesson by praising their idea development in addition to the usual skills feedback.

The students' performance may have been due, in part, to the anticipation of the reward of positive feedback, but as I mentioned before, this class was not very interested in functional language usage feedback. Because I focused heavily on ideas, the reward of positive feedback may have been more substantial. Also, Brown (2007a) notes that intrinsically motivating activities "appeal to the genuine interests" of students and are "relevant to their lives" (p. 181). The two discussions in this lesson focused on achieving a healthy work-life balance and improving the aging population in Japan, which are both popular topics the students were already concerned about and eager to discuss.

Because my focus had shifted heavily toward original student-generated ideas, I created a short list of questions related to lesson eleven's topics for them to consider before this class. This optional additional homework task proved to be ineffective, likely because students were not sufficiently motivated to complete it.

In lesson eleven, I predicted that students would likewise be interested and invested in the discussion topics of managing money and reducing poverty. However, despite encouraging original idea development by asking students to write down specific examples they had previously generated in a warm-up activity, the originality of their discussions were mixed. I observed that in discussions in which students shared their specific ideas, they appeared to be more invested and engaged in their discussions, but I observed the opposite when students shared more general ideas about the topic.

In lesson twelve, it became evident that students had little knowledge or experience about the discussion topic of crime and punishment, but I was determined to help them develop and share their ideas because, in all of my classes, students responded well to feedback that was strongly linked to ideas. Likewise, Bain (2004) suggests that enthusiasm for ideas are a stronger motivator than grades. I decided to scaffold my approach, encouraging students to compare

various punishments when discussing petty crimes. I then had the students evaluate their own performance in relation to functional language goals before I praised their most original ideas. This approach allowed me to shift most of the evaluative feedback to the students, so I was able to focus my feedback on rewarding students with praise for their ideas. Afterward, for their next discussion, I had them prepare ideas in pairs by discussing case studies I provided before completing another extended group discussion. This approach worked well for encouraging students to develop ideas, as I noted in my journal:

I've had success starting with general ideas and then moving to more specific cases. Students are also more willing to explore a variety of perspectives in this way. The overall quality of discussions has increased. Skill usage was excellent, far above average. Idea development was also strong.

Therefore, due to my reflections on this class's problems and solutions to these problems, I was able to combine the Brown's (2007b) principles of anticipation of reward, meaningful learning, and autonomy to encourage stronger functional language development by directing my students to focus primarily on idea development.

CONCLUSION

Critically reflecting on teaching is a valuable habit for any teacher, but keeping a journal, and writing in general, helps us better understand the causes and effects of our thoughts and actions. As I discussed above, my journal allowed me to better perceive and solve problems in my classroom using principled approaches.

In the future, I will continue journaling to reflect on my teaching. Of course I have already used my reflections to support my students in achieving more meaningful learning by encouraging them to share more original ideas about specific cases. Yet despite my successes, it is vital to continue reflecting-on-action and reflecting-for-action that can produce even better future results. For example, how might idea development have been affected if I had students begin with specific cases and moved to more general topics? Would students have used the specific cases as a means of building a more nuanced opinion of the general topic?

Some of my reflection-for-action only resulted in minor failures. For example, my attempt to assign optional homework failed to inspire idea development. However, reflecting on the failure made the cause of that failure evident, and I was able to devise changes to my teaching practices to better motivate students to share ideas, boosting their affective investment in discussing, with the possible effect of improving intrinsic motives to continue their language learning.

Thus, journaling to reflect-on-action and reflect-for-action is valuable for teachers because it makes it easy to see what worked well in a lesson, what did not work well in a lesson, and consider what may work better in future lessons. Teachers must always project confidence in the classroom, so it can become difficult for a teacher to overcome his or her ego to recognize areas of improvement; journaling may help overcome ego issues, perhaps especially if it is written in a low-pressure stream-of-consciousness style. Furthermore, Richards (2003) notes that teachers often have a difficult time meaningfully connecting with theory explicitly (p. 290-291), and journaling may provide teachers with an informal means of connecting their classroom practices with theory.

The positive results I achieved were directly attributable to my processes of reflecting and journaling, which helped me consider how to improve my students' learning outcomes. Although journaling may not be suitable or palatable for every teacher or teaching context, it is worth attempting due to its many benefits.

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